Possible Worlds and Fictional Worlds
7.5 hp Fall 2020

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will consider a number of narratives from different periods with a focus on the relations between the fictional and the actual, what exists and what may exist, with the help of theories of possible worlds and of fictionality. To analyze literature in terms of fictional worlds implies a different approach than the conventional one characterized by close reading and interpretation. It leads to different questions: instead of asking, what does this novel mean? we will ask, what kind of world is built by this text? That sort of questioning will force us to consider what we mean by a “world” in the first place. We will read a number of literary works whose distinctive fictional worlds claim a reality at least in our ability to imagine what is not the case.

Central concepts: Possible worlds; fictionality; referentiality; spatiality; utopia/dystopia, novum

INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES

At the end of the course, the students will have shown their ability to:

- discuss, in a critical and reflexive manner, the literary, critical and theoretical works that are part of the course
- formulate independent interpretations of literary texts, using the theoretical and critical concepts that are part of the course
- Give an account of and motivate their own theoretical positions and interpretations of literary works, orally as well as in writing

Teaching and Module activities

The module consists of eight two-hour seminars led by the instructor. The language of instruction will be English. Before each seminar, students are expected to finish the assigned reading, and be prepared to discuss the reading at the seminar, taking the teacher’s instructions and questions into account.

Grading

The module adopts the 7-grade SU scale.

To receive a final grade, students must have completed all the examination assignments [not done all examination assignments=no mark].

To receive a passing grade (A to E), students must have given a satisfactory oral presentation, and completed the written assignment in a satisfactory manner, demonstrating that they achieved all the learning outcomes at least at the minimum level (as described below, Appendix 1).
Module requirements and examination

While attendance at seminars is not a requirement, it is strongly recommended that you attend and participate. You will be required to give an oral presentation at one of the seminars, in which you will critically reflect on the set readings for the previous seminar. Instructions are found below. The oral presentation is graded pass/fail. One longer essay will be written as part of your performance in this course. Instructions are found below. The essays must be handed in no later than [date]. The essay is graded according to the grading criteria, found below.

Seminar plan (all seminars will be conducted via Zoom)

   Reading: Beowulf, lines 1-1250; Gardner, Grendel; Ryan, “Possible Worlds and Accessibility Relations”; Hayot, “On Literary Worlds.”
   Reading: Defoe, Robinson Crusoe; Gallagher, “The rise of fictionality”; Festa, “Crusoe’s Island of Misfit Things.”
   Reading: Robinson Crusoe; Coetzee, Foe; Doležel, excerpt from Heterocosmica.
5. Sep 29, 10-12. Fictional space, unreal spatiality? Impossible worlds?
   Reading: O’Brien, The Third Policeman; McHale, excerpt from Postmodernist Fiction
   Reading: Le Guin, The Left Hand of Darkness; Butler, Kindred; Suvin, “Locus, Horizon, and Orientation.”
7. Oct 13, 10-12. The novel, the historical novel, the novel of the future, the geopolitical novel, and our world
   Reading: Mitchell, Cloud Atlas. Jameson, Chapter III (sec. 2) of Antinomies of Realism.

Always check TimeEdit to see if there are changes in the schedule.
**COURSE LITERATURE**

**Primary works**

*Beowulf* (in Seamus Heaney’s translation, available in many anthologies or as a paperback). We will focus on the first part, lines 1-1250.


**Secondary material**


Suvin, Darko. “Locus, Horizon, and Orientation: The Concept of Possible Worlds as a Key to Utopian Studies.” *Utopian Studies* 1.2 (1990): 69-83. (Excerpt: Sections 3-4, 76-83, also available through SUB subscription)
## Grading Criteria (written assignment)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A: Excellent</td>
<td>The student shows excellent ability when:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- discussing, in a critical and reflexive manner, the literary, critical and theoretical works that are part of the course</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- formulating independent interpretations of literary texts, using the theoretical and critical concepts that are part of the course</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Giving an account of and motivating their own theoretical positions and interpretations of literary works</td>
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<td>B: Very good</td>
<td>The student shows a very good ability when:</td>
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<td>- discussing, in a critical and reflexive manner, the literary, critical and theoretical works that are part of the course</td>
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<td>C: Good</td>
<td>The student shows good ability when:</td>
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<td>- discussing, in a critical and reflexive manner, the literary, critical and theoretical works that are part of the course</td>
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<td>D: Adequate</td>
<td>The student shows adequate ability when:</td>
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<td>- discussing, in a critical and reflexive manner, the literary, critical and theoretical works that are part of the course</td>
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<td>E: Minimally</td>
<td>The student shows minimally adequate ability when:</td>
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<tr>
<td>adequate</td>
<td>- discussing, in a critical and reflexive manner, the literary, critical and theoretical works that are part of the course</td>
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<td>- Giving an account of and motivating their own theoretical positions and interpretations of literary works</td>
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<td>Fx: Fail (Inadequate)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<td>F: Fail</td>
<td>The student’s work does not demonstrate the achievement of the learning outcomes of the module.</td>
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<td>Criteria</td>
<td>Pass</td>
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<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td>The presentation introduces the topic of the presentation in a clear and concise manner demonstrating the student's understanding of the literary and theoretical issues discussed. These issues are presented and discussed in a lucid manner.</td>
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<td><strong>Organisation and language</strong></td>
<td>The presentation is well structured and easy to follow. The language used is academic and does not contain any severe mistakes.</td>
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**ORAL PRESENTATION ASSIGNMENT**

The oral presentation assignment will demonstrate that you fulfill the learning outcomes for the course with regard to “giv[ing] an account of and motivate[ing] their own theoretical positions and interpretations of literary works, orally as well as in writing.”

At the beginning of the course, we will distribute these assignments among the student group, so that in each seminar there will be one or several oral presentations in which students reflect critically on the readings for the previous and the current seminar. As part of these reflections, the student should take a stance vis-à-vis the theoretical or critical positions and making a point regarding their implications for how one (or several) of the literary works we have read for those two seminars can be analyzed.

The oral presentation should be at least five minutes long, and should not extend past ten minutes. It should be clearly structured, with an introduction and a conclusion. It should be addressed to your fellow students.

**ESSAY ASSIGNMENT**

**Background**

The course essay should demonstrate that you fulfill the learning outcomes for the course (see above). In the best of worlds, it might also help prepare you for your Master’s Thesis project.

**Submission formalities**

No later than midnight, November 2, you should submit a written essay in the form of a document uploaded to Athena. The document should be compatible with MS Word and it should be named “PW_essay_yourname.” The essay should be between 2500 and 3500 words long.

**Content and aims**

The essay should present a comparative analysis of at least two literary works, one of them included in the reading list for the course, one of them of your own choosing. (Although you may choose another text from the course reading list, if you wish). Ideally, you will choose a second text that may become part of, or relevant for, your Master’s or Magister Thesis, but this is clearly not a requirement. The comparative analysis should take for its starting point the forms of analysis that this course focuses on: the kind of study that follows from considering literary works as projecting imaginary worlds. The theoretical reading for the course mostly assumes that it is the case that a literary text does project, construct, or constitute a possible world that differs from the Actual world in various ways. However, if you wish to argue against that general assumption, this is also a possibility. The important point is that you would do so by engaging with these positions. If your essay starts from conceding this starting point, the comparative analysis will test various conceptions of and stances vis-à-vis “imaginary worlds.” The analysis may focus on narratological concerns, ideological issues, ethical questions, reader-response considerations, psychoanalytical matters – the list could be extended, and will depend on your own particular investments and interests. One question that will have to be faced in some way, however, will be whether conceiving of literary texts as projecting imaginary worlds, storyworlds, possible worlds, etc., contributes significantly to our understanding of them and their relation to other works as well as to what is external to them. This need not in any way be the central question of the essay, but it should be part of the analysis.
Take care to present the positions you argue with or against: even a reader who hasn’t taken this course should be able to follow your reasoning. The essay should display what Eric Hayot has called “citational density”: you are expected to put the critical texts you have read to work in your own writing. Since the essay is the primary means for you to show what you have learned in the course, it is important that you engage with a range of the critical readings. In addition, you should include at least one peer-reviewed source that you have located yourself that is relevant to your argument in the essay.

Formalities
Please use a 12-pt font, one-and-a-half-spaced lines, and either indented paragraphs or a space between paragraphs, and the normal, default margins. For documentation, use Chicago style, and include a full list of works cited. The essay should be carefully revised to avoid language errors, and it should have an introduction and a conclusion which do justice to the content. It should also have a title which serves to guide the reader’s expectations of what will be found in the essay.

If you have any questions about the assignment, please contact me. And if you get stuck, do so as soon as possible: we don’t want our students to succumb to writer’s block. Often it helps just to talk about it.

Resubmission date: December 7